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THE HISTORICITY OF THE APOSTOLIC DECREE

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Adventurous as well as balanced attempts have been made to reconcile the fifteenth chapter of Acts and Paul's summary in the second chapter of Galatians. As the commentaries on Acts and Galatians and histories of the apostolic age appear, the debate becomes more involved. The questions at issue constantly demand discussion. For the Apostolic Conference, so called, is of primary importance to any adequate appreciation of the apostolic era. There is a widespread conviction that the solutions hitherto attempted upon the basis of the usually accepted text have ended in failure. But many now agree that the essential point of difference that remains is the apostolic decree.¹ We propose to discuss the historicity of this resolution adopted at Jerusalem.

I. CONTENDING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE DECREE

The decree is referred to in Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25. Several interpretations are proposed. The first is based upon what may be described as the "four-clause" text. It urges converts from among the Gentiles to abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from fornication. The decree is then regarded as a food regulation, plus the strange addition of a moral restriction. This view represents the tradition supported by such manuscripts as $\aleph$ B C, etc., and by the Alexandrian Fathers Clement and Origen. Another interpretation depends upon D, the Latin version, Irenaeus, Tertullian, etc. This form of text contains three clauses with the addition, as a rule, of the Golden Rule in negative form and a reference to the Spirit. The Gentiles are enjoined to conform to certain moral requirements.

¹ Harnack, *Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 1911, IV, 22.

A third interpretation accepts the four-clause text, but explains all of the clauses as different forms of idolatry.²

II. THE ARGUMENT AGAINST THE FOUR-CLAUSE TEXT

The four-clause text is very ancient. Clement of Alexandria supports this reading. Nevertheless, the historicity of the decree in this form is very doubtful. To begin with the text, *πνικτοῦ* is indefinite, whereas the other words of the group are definite.³ *πνικτοῦ* is always found in close proximity to *αἷμα*. It changes its position with the latter word. Some manuscripts of the Vulgate and some of the Fathers combine "blood" and "strangled," reading *sanguine suffocato* or an equivalent. It would seem that *πνικτοῦ* may not stand as a separate member of the list. Wellhausen has "decisively proved that *πνικτόν* is included in the prohibition of *αἷμα* and cannot stand as a separate member of the list."⁴

The accepted interpretation involves a peculiar unity. To associate a permanently valid moral restriction with temporary conciliatory requirements is not at all natural. And Harnack reminds us that "no one has yet been able to explain satisfactorily" this detail.⁵

The context is opposed to the assumption that the brethren passed a set of resolutions regarding meats. James urges (vs. 19) that Gentiles becoming Christians should not be troubled. Could he, then, a moment later, move the adoption of a measure which

² Lake, *The Earlier Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 60, offers a brief criticism of this view. Chase (*Hulsean Lectures*, 1902, pp. 96 f.) suggests another explanation. Blood and things strangled "refer to rites current among heathen Semites, blood possibly to the rite of blood-brotherhood, still known in the Lebanon and in some parts of Arabia; things strangled, to certain sacrifices referred to in Isaiah, possibly connected with mystic initiations. These practices are chosen for special prohibition, partly because they prevailed in Syria (the letter is addressed to churches in Antioch and Syria), partly because they were peculiarly abhorrent to Jewish feeling." The obvious criticism of this interpretation is that the decree was not intended for heathen Semites but for Greeks who had become Christians. The dispute originated in the Greek Christian church at Antioch. Moreover, the letter was taken by Paul to churches founded on the "first" missionary journey.

³ Hilgenfeld, *Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie*, 1899, pp. 389 ff.; G. Resch, *Texte u. Untersuchungen*, Bd. 28, 3, p. 13.

⁴ Harnack, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 252.

⁵ Harnack, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

would incalculably vex the Gentiles? James proves from the experience of Peter and by a quotation from the Old Testament that God has recognized a gentile Christianity apart from circumcision. Paul affirms in Galatians that the pillars at Jerusalem recognized a gentile Christianity independent of circumcision. Are we nevertheless to contradict not only Paul but also Peter and James by insisting that Jewish peculiarities were imposed upon the Gentiles? Only necessary things were to be laid upon the Gentiles. Did the early church regard legislation concerning food essential? Was abstention from non-kosher meat to be a distinguishing mark of the new society?

To insist that a food law was enacted at Jerusalem leads to absurdity. The question at issue at Jerusalem was the observance of the Mosaic law, especially with reference to circumcision. Here is a called meeting of the mother church eliminating the most characteristic label of Judaism, a rite associated with the promise given to Abraham and made eternally valid (Gen. 17:13, 14), only to impose upon the same Gentiles burdens three-fold heavier. A prescribed custom abolished! The lifelong practice of far more exacting and wearisome practices demanded! A conference in session to pass upon the validity of non-moral requirements of the Mosaic law reaches the marvelous conclusion that food restrictions are to obtain in the church of Him who said: There is nothing from without a man that going into him can defile him! (Mark 7:15). And Paul who asserts that religion is spiritual and ethical, that circumcision and its omission alike are valueless to one connected with Jesus, delivers the decrees to the gentile churches founded by him in order that they may avoid ceremonial uncleanness!⁶

The apostolic decree interpreted as a regulation regarding foods is not in harmony with the remainder of the New Testament. It is remarkable that Luke should not elsewhere refer to prohibited meats. The controversy in Acts and in Galatians turns upon circumcision. If a measure as specific as this decree was approved as a working hypothesis, some trace of it should be discoverable in subsequent events. The action of the mother church is unique.

⁶ Acts 16:4.

Beyond this passage the New Testament is unfamiliar with proscribed foods. Witness the teaching of Jesus in Mark 7:1-23.⁷ Paul is not conscious of any obligation to observe rules regarding meats. "Let no man judge you in meat, or in drink," etc. (Col. 2:16-23). "Love is the fulfilment of the law" (Rom. 13:10; Gal. 5:14). As Lake puts it, "It is clear that in this chapter (I Cor., chap. 10), St. Paul is either deliberately ignoring the Apostolic Decrees, or interpreting them as forbidding idolatry, *not as establishing a food law.*"⁸ Consider this fragment of a verse from the Epistle to the Hebrews: "being only (with meats and drinks and divers washings) carnal ordinances, imposed until a time of reformation" (Heb. 9:10; cf. Heb. 13:9). The apostolic decree is the only passage in the entire New Testament requiring Gentiles to observe Jewish scruples concerning foods.

To interpret the four-clause text as a food law compels the acceptance of *εἰδωλόθυστα* in the sense of sacrificial flesh on sale in the markets. But Paul does not forbid the purchase of meat used in the sacrifice and on sale in the shops. If Resch is not in error, the Jews were nowhere forbidden to purchase such meat.⁹ Moreover, *πνικτοῦ* is not found in the Old Testament and was not forbidden to the Jews. Indeed after an exhaustive investigation, Resch¹⁰ reaches the conclusion that the term refers not to the flesh of animals, slaughtered or shot, that were not completely bled, but to the flesh of animals that met death without the loss of any blood. Lev. 17:10-16 contains no prohibition of eating things strangled (so Resch, Wiener, Sanday, and others). *πνικτόν* is not "Terminus der hebräischen und jüdischen Theologie."¹¹

⁷ Seeberg, *Die beiden Wege*; Resch, *Texte und Untersuchungen*, N.F., Bd. 13, pp. 37 ff.; Harnack, *Acts*, p. 255; cf. Matt. 23:1-36; Luke 11:37-52. We know that the words of Jesus possessed superlative authority in the early church. Matt. 23:3 and John 14:26 should have occurred to the adopters of a food rule.

⁸ Lake, *The Earlier Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 51, note 2; cf. also Forbes (Moffatt, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 307), "It is conceivable that Paul might have agreed to a number of concessions for the sake of peace and harmony, but 'that he consented to, or was party to, a demand that his converts should observe these four legal conditions is not only disproven by his own clear words, but by the absence of any such precept in his letters to the gentile churches on this matter.'"

⁹ G. Resch, *Das Aposteldekret*, p. 22.

¹⁰ Resch, pp. 23 ff.

¹¹ Resch, p. 34.

In fact, the Jews, as late as the tenth century of our era, were still permitted to purchase *πικτόν*. Hence it is not easy to explain why the apostles should have insisted upon what Jews themselves would not have demanded. There is no evidence that the Jewish party in the Christian church at Jerusalem was interested in "things strangled." It requires a huge imagination to concede that they would have surrendered on the question of circumcision and have shown such permanent interest in the matter "of extracting blood from slaughtered animals."¹²

Advocates of the accepted text are obliged to antedate the controversy between Peter and Paul at Antioch. Sanday¹³ frankly admits that "there is a *prima facie* difficulty in harmonizing what is said about the scene at Antioch in Galatians with the assumption that there could be anything to prevent Peter from eating with Gentiles, supposing that the terms of the decree were observed." This problem is then readily solved by simply dogmatically affirming that the scene at Antioch preceded the Council of Jerusalem. But Paul should then have referred to it before narrating his experience with the pillars at Jerusalem. Paul does not imply that his collision with Peter was prior to the Jerusalem conference. His summary has been brief and rapid but chronological. In the absence of any indications that he is departing from the chronological order, it would be unwise to accept the proposed solution.

Another method of procedure is to conjecture that Luke has antedated the decree¹⁴—the decree, it is alleged, came into existence some time between Paul's composition of Galatians and his arrival at Jerusalem (Acts 21:25). The decree would then be the work of James and his party. But Clemen, insisting that the decree is not genuine, nevertheless concludes that it was certainly inserted at the right place.

The supporters of the usual interpretation are obliged to assert that Paul's consent to the decree was a passive consent. But the

¹² Lake, *The Earlier Epistles of Paul*, p. 55.

¹³ Lake, *The Earlier Epistles of Paul*, p. 50, disposes of Sanday's argument against the trustworthiness of D and Irenaeus.

¹⁴ Cf. Moffatt, *Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 307 f.

resolution was read at Antioch and Paul himself transmitted it to the Greek churches founded by him (cf. Acts 16:4). This point is completely neglected by Sanday. And there is no data to warrant the conclusion that the decree was intended as a temporary measure and prescribed for a limited area (cf. 16:4; 21:25).

III. THE GENUINENESS OF THE "WESTERN" READING¹⁵

We have offered sufficient argument to make it plain that the text of the apostolic decree requires re-examination. The solution of the problem will not be discovered until we rightly value the Bezan readings of the passages in dispute. At present the Westcott-Hort theory of the text of the New Testament still holds the field against all opposition—at least in England and the United States. This theory holds that the text of the New Testament (prior to the middle of the third century) consisted of two main branches—"Western" and "Neutral." In the neighborhood of 300 A.D. an eclectic text was produced by working over the existing texts and by conjectural emendations. Hort described the "Western" text as characterized by boldness of paraphrase and a tendency to wander into wider and wider variation. He neglected the readings of the "Western" text, except in a few instances which he described as "Western non-interpolations" or "Neutral interpolations." But of late there has been a rehearing on the "Western" text. Its name is seen to be inappropriate. Witnesses to this type of text are found in the West, in Africa, and in the extreme East. It includes "all ancient unrevised texts." It is found in Origen and Clement as well as in Justin Martyr, Marcion, Tatian, and Irenaeus. It can be traced back to sub-apostolic times. It was the common text of the church about the middle of the second century. It is no longer safe "to condemn a reading off-hand because the authorities for it are of the 'Western type.'" Every "Western" reading must be considered on its own merits. The general results of the criticism of the Westcott-Hort view of the "Western" text is the recognition of the fact

¹⁵ Hilgenfeld and G. Resch have done pioneer work in behalf of this interpretation. Harnack accepted their conclusion and defends it in his *Acts*. Lake also approves of it.

that "Westcott and Hort (largely from lack of evidence) underestimated the possibility that a consensus of the Old Latin and the Old Syriac may give us a really primitive text, even when opposed to the great uncials" (Lake, *Textual Criticism*, p. 98).

Although D exhibits a "curious, eccentric, wandering text, conspicuous for paraphrase and interpolation," it is generally agreed that it sometimes preserves very ancient readings. D seems to preserve the original reading in, e.g., Acts 11:20 and 13:8. Most accept the instance in Acts 11:20, and scholars of such opposite tendencies as Zahn and Clemen and Harris defend D in 13:8, and these examples could easily be increased. It is no longer safe and orthodox always to rule D out of court.

With this brief reference to the increasing importance that is attaching to the "Western" text, we come to the question of reading in Acts 15:29.¹⁶ There are three main types of text: the Eastern, Western, and conflate forms. Of course there are exceedingly important variations within these forms. But very broadly speaking, the principal uncials support the Eastern form; Beza and the Western Fathers witness to the "Western" form. According to the Eastern reading, the decree must be interpreted as a regulation concerning foods. It is the "four-clause" text.

The "Western" text omits or modifies *καὶ πνικτόν* or its equivalent and may therefore be described as the "three-clause" text. Another characteristic of the "Western" reading is the addition of the Golden Rule in negative form and a reference to the Spirit. Dd, Athous, Sahid., Irenaeus, Porphyry, Gigas, Augustine, Tertullian, Cyprian, Pacian, Jerome, etc., omit *πνικτόν*. The Vulgate, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Gaudentius combine *πνικτόν* with *αἷμα* to form one idea.

We incline to the opinion that the Golden Rule is a "Western" insertion. Inserted where it is, the Golden Rule "breaks the connection between the relative *ἀφ' ὧν* and its antecedents and so makes the whole sentence impossible." It is wanting in Acts 21:25. If the Golden Rule were original, the transformation of

¹⁶ Cf. Resch, pp. 7-19; Sanday, pp. 320-23; Harnack, *Acts*, pp. 251 ff.; Lake, *The Earlier Epistles*, pp. 48 f.

the decree as a summary of moral precepts into a food law would scarcely have occurred.¹⁷

The "Western" text tends to paraphrase and to addition, not to omission. But in our instance it actually omits *πνικτόν*. How shall we explain this omission? Interpolations characterize D. Lake¹⁸ shows conclusively that "there is no possibility of alleging any motive" for the omission of *πνικτόν*. The very circles that read the three-clause text also observed a food law that "mentioned things strangled." To assume a *deliberate* scribal omission as early as the second century is rather precarious. And to omit *πνικτόν* was to purposely alter the plain meaning of the decree. Would it not be a more plausible explanation to regard the appearance of *πνικτόν* as almost a case of gradual "neutral" addition of "Western non-interpolation"?¹⁹ The "Western" reading could be accepted without doing violence to the theory of Westcott and Hort.

To establish the "Western" text for the decree beyond a doubt it will be necessary to interpret it and to trace the history of the decree.

If the "Western" readings are assumed, the Council that met at Jerusalem imposed upon the Gentiles the observance of a few fundamental rules of morals. It did not prohibit the consumption of certain meats. *Εἰδωλοθύτων* may refer to sacrificial flesh on sale in the markets or to idolatry; see I Cor. 8:1 ff.; 10:19 f.; Rev. 14:20. The context and the remainder of the New Testament require the interpretation of idolatry.

αἷμα may denote partaking of blood or shedding of blood; may be dietary or moral. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament *αἷμα* is repeatedly used in the sense of murder. Resch has certainly shown this. See Lev. 17:4; Num. 35:27; Matt. 23:30; Rev. 6:10; also Eccles. 34:25; Pausanias v. 1, 6;

¹⁷ So Harnack, Lake, Sanday. But Hilgenfeld and Resch maintain that the Golden Rule is original. Steinmetz (p. 50) refuses to decide the question. Lake, *Earlier Epistles*, p. 52, regards the addition of the Golden Rule as due to the desire to make the interpretation of the decree as a moral rule, definite.

¹⁸ Lake, *The Earlier Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 50.

¹⁹ *Versus Sanday*, *Theologische Studien*, Theo. Zahn dargestellt, p. 323.

Plato, *Laws* 872DE, etc.²⁰ The prohibition of murder is neither strange nor superfluous. Exposure and slaying of children, abortion, murder of slaves were not infrequent. And murder might well include "every injury to the life of one's neighbor" (see I Pet. 4:15; I John 3:15; Rev. 22:15; Jas. 4:2). The gentile Christians were at the very beginning of their Christian career. They were constantly in danger of relapsing into sin (cf. Gal. 5:20; I Cor. 5:1 ff.). More than a century later Tertullian says that *pudicitia* is rare and murder not unusual. The apostles, then, enjoined upon the gentile Christians the necessity of being on their guard against idolatry, adultery, and murder.

The history of the decree is the best argument in favor of the "Western" reading. The Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists are unacquainted with "regulations concerning meats binding upon Christians."²¹ The earliest Eastern Fathers to interpret the decree as a prohibition of meats are Clement and Origen, and their exegesis is based upon the accepted text.²² The entire Western church regarded the apostolic decree as an ethical summary. Even fathers like Tertullian who insist upon abstention from blood and things strangled interpret the decree as an ethical principle. In *Apol.* 9; *de Monog.* 5; *de Jejun.* 4, Tertullian mentions the prohibition of blood, but does not appeal to the decree. He appeals to I Corinthians and Revelation when insisting upon abstention from flesh offered to idols (cf. *de Spec.* 13; *de Cor.* 10; *de Jejun.* 15). In *de Pud.* 12, Tertullian refers the three mortal sins to the Jerusalem rescript: "Sufficient it is, that in this place withal there has been preserved to adultery and fornication the post of honor between idolatry and murder: for the interdict upon blood we shall understand to be an interdict much more upon human blood." Tertullian insists upon abstention from blood and from things strangled, but does not quote the decree as his authority. The decree is in his opinion simply a proof-text for the three ecclesiastical mortal sins. Cyprian²³ translates *εἰδωλοθύτων* by *ab idololatriis*. Pacian traces the three mortal sins to Acts 15:20. Augustine informs us that some in his day were accustomed to

²⁰ Resch, *Das Aposteldekret*, pp. 42 f.

²² Harnack, pp. 253 f.

²¹ Harnack, p. 259; Resch, pp. 43 ff.

²³ Resch, pp. 43 f.

trace the origin of the *tria crimina mortifera* to the verse in Acts.²⁴ In the Western Fathers there is no trace of prohibition of meats based upon the apostolic resolution. And it is exceedingly significant that the ethical exegesis of the apostolic decree made its influence felt in the ecclesiastical determination of mortal sins.

The selection of these three commandments by Jewish Christians is not a unique but a very intelligent proceeding. Resch²⁵ argues that they were intended to forbid all non-moral conduct. They served as a *compendia disciplinae* (*de Pud.* 12). They were not at first viewed quantitatively. They covered the entire sphere of wrongdoing. Idolatry could refer to all manner of sins against God; *πορνεία*, to all sins against the body; *αἵμα*, to sins against one's neighbor. There are a number of catalogues of sins in the New Testament, e.g., Gal. 5:19-21; Rom. 1:24-32; Col. 3:5-8; Eph. 5:3-5; I Pet. 2:1; II Pet. 2:9-14; Rev. 17:3; cf. also, *Didache* 3:1-6; 5:1 f.; Bar., chap. 20, etc. The roots of all these summaries seem to lead to the three fundamental sins of Acts 15:29.²⁶ The Talmud also mentions these three sins as principal. It is also a telling point that the Sibyllines²⁷ select abstinence from idolatry, shedding of blood, and immorality as the marks of a good life.²⁸

The ethical interpretation of the apostolic decree is in harmony with the teaching of Jesus, of Paul, and of the remainder of the New Testament, is historically defensible, is the only exegesis of the passage recognized by the Western church until the time of Augustine, shows that an intelligent working hypothesis was adopted at the Jerusalem gathering, made its influence felt in the ecclesiastical determination of mortal sins, is textually supported by Western types of text and by early patristic testimony. We therefore conclude that the original decree of the apostolic meeting at Jerusalem has been preserved to us in a "Western" reading. The result of the deliberations at Jerusalem over the theoretical recognition of the Gentiles was the adoption of a broad

²⁴ Migne, 34, 994.

²⁵ Resch, pp. 78 ff.

²⁶ See Resch's interesting comments, pp. 108 ff.

²⁷ *Or. Sib.* iv. 24-34, 162-70.

²⁸ Lake, *The Earlier Epistles of St. Paul*, pp. 56 f.

ethical law. The attitude which Jewish Christians should practically adopt toward gentile Christians remained to be determined by further reflection and by tragic experiences.²⁹

IV. THE ORIGIN OF THE "EASTERN" TEXT

The question that remains is how *πνικτόν* crept into the text of the main uncials.³⁰ Regulations concerning meats originated in the East.³¹ They had been transmitted to the West before the end of the second century. The epistle from Lyons and Vienna is the most ancient Christian reference witnessing to a Christian custom of abstaining from blood.³² But both in the East and the West food laws arose independently of the apostolic decree. Nothing could make this more evident than the fact that Irenaeus who insists upon distinctions with reference to foods, interpreted the decree as a code "of ethical precepts."³³ The colonists at Lyons were observing food rules and also reading a three-clause text. Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria also bear witness to a Christian food code. But the Christian food regulation, except in Alexandria, is not associated with the apostolic decree.

The Christian custom of abstaining from what has been strangled and from sacrifices offered to idols seems connected with their theory of demonology.

Athenagoras (*Legat* c. 26) says: "They who draw men to idols are the aforesaid demons, who are eager for the blood of the sacrifices and lick them." Clement of Alexandria (*Paed.* III, 8) warns Christians to avoid things sacrificed to idols because of the demons to which they are dedicated. Origen (*vs. Celsus* VIII, 30) remarks: As to things strangled, we are forbidden to partake of them, because the blood is still in them; and blood, especially the odor arising from the blood, is said to be

²⁹ Occasionally an appeal is taken to the so-called Noachic regulations as corresponding to the *four-clause* text of the apostolic decree. Lake, p. 55, shows that the resemblance is closer to the *three-clause* text.

³⁰ See especially Resch, pp. 151-70; Lake, pp. 50 ff.; Harnack, *Acts*, pp. 260 f.

³¹ So Bockenhoff, Harnack, Resch.

³² Eus., *H.E.*, V, 1, 26: "How could those eat children who do not think it lawful to taste the blood even of irrational animals?"

³³ Iren., *Adv. Haer.*, III, 12, 14.

the food of demons. Perhaps, then, if we were to eat of strangled animals we might have such spirits feed along with us.³⁴

There is then this early Christian prejudice against blood. To this we must add the brevity and ambiguity of the decree.³⁵ The three-clause text contained two words which would very readily be misunderstood, viz., *εἰδωλόθυτα* and *αἷμα*. The resolution was indefinite, and could be interpreted as a moral law or a dietary restriction. Its meaning came to depend upon the inclination of the reader. What prevented the scribe who viewed the concise decree as a food regulation and who was prejudiced against blood from adding "things strangled" as a marginal note to explain *αἷμα*? Then there would be no doubt that *αἷμα* signified, not murder, but "meat in which the blood had been retained." Soon the marginal gloss crept into the text and completely transformed the original significance of the decree. The changed text is first met with in Alexandria. Thence the transformed decree gradually found its way into the main uncials. But as late as the time of Augustine, the West had not adopted the erroneous interpretation.

After eighteen centuries an examination of the text has yielded the correct interpretation of this important verse.³⁶ This result should enlist our sympathy and interest in behalf of the toilers in the field of New Testament interpretation, and should make us more enthusiastic concerning the textual criticism of the New Testament.³⁷

³⁴ See further Tert., *Apol.*, c. 22; Justin Martyr, *Apol.*, I, 12 ("I am persuaded that these things are the doing of evil spirits, who exact sacrifices and worship even from those who live contrary to reason"); Aristides *Apol.* 15.

³⁵ See especially Lake, *Earlier Epistles of St. Paul*, pp. 51 f., and Harnack, *Acts*.

³⁶ One of the interesting facts with reference to the history of the interpretation of the apostolic decree is that Harnack who in 1899 wrote a monograph in favor of the four-clause text was obliged to recant a decade later because of the studies of G. Resch.

³⁷ Among those who favor the three-clause text are Hilgenfeld, G. Resch, Harnack, Lake, Steinmetz.